



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Grant, P. (2020). 'Remembering Popular Music's Past' book review. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(3), pp. 321-323. doi: 10.1080/13527258.2019.1663240

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/22710/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2019.1663240>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

‘Remembering Popular Music’s Past’ edited by Lauren Istvandity, Sarah Baker and Zelmarie Cantillon, London, Anthem Press, 2019. 254 pp, hardback ISBN:9781783089703 £25.00, \$140.00; ebook ISBN:9781783089710 £25.00, \$40.00.

Not that many years ago the idea of basing major exhibitions at prestigious museums upon popular music and musicians would have seemed absurd. Yet now exhibitions such as those on David Bowie or Pink Floyd and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the permanent collections devoted to Jimi Hendrix and Nirvana in Seattle or the establishment of the Home of Metal at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery raise barely a murmur.

In the introduction to this new collection the editors suggest that its focus ‘is on the transformation of popular music into heritage, and the role of history and memory in this process’ (p 1). Whilst I am uncertain that this emphasis is entirely maintained throughout all the contributions it is certainly a very wide-ranging book. Though several concentrate on music in Australia, being a collection edited by three people based there are chapters on topics from all parts of the world including Yorkshire folk music, the soundtrack to Martin Scorsese’s ‘Mean Streets’ and Korean Pop-Rock.

Though it is a hotly debated topic the link between heritage and nostalgia is often foregrounded in the book.¹ Very often the emphasis of individual chapters is on nostalgia and the term has the highest number of references in the index. Nostalgia dominates the first chapter in the collection by Paul Long on the Click Club in Birmingham in the 1980s and that by Adele Pavlidis, recalling the heyday of an independent record shop in Melbourne where ‘I remember staff Christmas parties that went on until the early hours of the morning’ (p 56).

Amanda Howell’s chapter on the music used in ‘Mean Streets’ also specifically references nostalgia – this time the nostalgia of the film maker. She utilises Svetlana Boym’s definitions of ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia through which she suggested that ‘nostalgia remains

an intermediary between collective and individual memory' (quoted by Howell p 77) to convincing effect. The shared traditions of Little Italy as depicted in the film fall into Boym's restorative bracket whereas Scorsese's more personal recollections meet the reflective test. In a paper that sheds interesting new light on the use of popular music in film Howell demonstrates that the past evoked by 'Mean Streets' is significantly driven by its musical soundtrack.

Other authors suggest that popular music heritage is ephemeral in nature both because of the fragility of recording media (such as the cd) and its changing value to society. For example in Charles Fairchild's chapter he makes the important distinction between art objects collected due to the skill of their makers and pop music 'ephemera' that only gain their place through who they were used by – 'these objects are not the work, they merely refer to the work and do so very indirectly' (p 104). Raphael Nowak goes further by titling his chapter 'Questioning the future of popular music heritage in the age of platform capitalism' and heading one section 'Evaluating the contemporary obsession with the preservation of popular music heritage' (p 150). One can see this in action very frequently such as in August 2019 when a bandstand in Beckenham, London was given a Grade II heritage listing mainly due to the fact that David Bowie once played there in 1969.²

The book is divided into three sections but perhaps never quite comes to terms with the divisions between heritage, memory and history with some of the chapters being equally at home in other sections. An example is the chapter by Sheryl Davis, Sherry Davis and Zelmarie Cantillon on the Surf Ballroom – the venue where Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and J.P. Richardson ('The Big Bopper') played their final concert. They usefully refer to Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura' which Benjamin defines as the value attributed to a work of art being based on its having been touched by the hand of the artist – for example in the differing financial values placed on the painting 'Salvator Mundi' being based on whether it is by the

hand of Leonardo or not. Their chapter is in the 'History' section, but it shares methodological bases with several in the Memory section. This is really only a minor criticism but leaving out the section heads might have avoided some issues.

There is also a somewhat variable approach to theories of memory and history. Whilst some chapters, notably those already mentioned, are strongly underpinned by theory and add significantly to the concepts of previous authors, a few are less soundly based and therefore more akin to case studies.

There is also something of an issue with the final chapter of the collection, by Catherine Strong and titled 'Towards a feminist history of popular music: re-examining writing on musicians and domestic violence in the wake of #metoo'. This is an exceptionally important and challenging piece that extends feminist critiques of history (not just in popular music) beyond simply pointing out the extent to which history is written by men about men whilst excluding or trivialising the role of women. It asks whether our view of musicians (and by extension any historically 'important' males) should be affected by their behaviour towards women – specifically whether they have inflicted domestic abuse on their partners. Strong looks at two case studies – those of Axl Rose and XXXTentacion. Perhaps unsurprisingly she demonstrates how male writers have tried to excuse their subject's abusive behaviour and switch their readers' sympathy to the abusers. The perpetrators behaviour is excused or downplayed to the extent that they are presented as the victims, whilst their female victims are accused of leading them on or not understanding them. The same process is found time and again in rape trials or the comments of President Trump against the 24 women who have made allegations of sexual misconduct against him. My concern with this chapter is that it does rather sit outside the mainstream concerns of the volume as a whole. Indeed it warrants a book of its own.

Notwithstanding these minor defects 'Remembering Popular Music's Past' is a strong and important addition to the, fortunately, burgeoning literature on popular music history and memory. All the chapters add to the debate and many initiate new ideas and areas for investigation that should be followed up.

Dr Peter Grant, City University of London

¹ See for example Higson, Andrew. "Nostalgia is not what it used to be: heritage films, nostalgia websites and contemporary consumers." *Consumption Markets & Culture* 17.2 (2014): 120-142 or Smith, Laurajane, and Gary Campbell. "'Nostalgia for the future': memory, nostalgia and the politics of class." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23.7 (2017): 612-627.

² 'David Bowie's Beckenham bandstand gets Grade II listed status' BBC website
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-49360237>